

Liberty Call

Utah Survivor:

Lee Soucy fights to correct history and remember the ‘forgotten memorial’

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USS Utah (AG 13) survivor and former pharmacist’s mate Lee Soucy and his family visited his former ship, now a memorial, on Tuesday.

Soucy, 80 years old, vividly remembers looking out a porthole in the sickbay onboard Utah just before 8 a.m. on the morning of Dec. 7, 1941. Utah had been previously refitted as a target ship to allow Navy aircraft to practice dropping their bombs on its wood-covered deck.

Practice bombing was almost a daily event to the crew of the Utah, but the time and place were quite out of line when the attack began that morning. Soucy initially thought that it was Marine Corps aircraft practicing their bombing skills.

“Then when the first bombs dropped on the hangers at Ford Island, I thought, those guys are missing us by a mile,” Soucy said. The fact that the ships might actually be under attack from the Japanese, “was too incredible, simply beyond imagination!” Soucy recalled.

About that time, Soucy recalled watching the explosions on Ford Island in amazement and disbelief. Then he felt Utah lurch from the torpedo attack to the ship’s port side. Shortly after that, Soucy remembered hearing the bugler, who was preparing to raise morning “colors” on the ship’s fantail, call away general quarters. He then grabbed his first aid bag and headed for his battle station amidships.

Soucy has been a proponent of the well-known and documented history of the attack on Utah. He has been documenting the irregularities in the history of the attack and is looking to have his resulting work published under the title “The Three Lives of the USS Utah: photos, facts and fallacies.”

Soucy refers to Utah as the “mightiest ship afloat” in the first stage of its life, an “impotent” bombing target in the ship’s second life and finally as an advanced anti-aircraft gunnery school in its third and final life. According to Soucy, “The best guns in the world were on this ship.”

Some history books tell us that the Japanese believed that they had sunk the aircraft carrier USS

Enterprise, which just two days before, had gotten underway with the rest of the aircraft carriers based at Pearl Harbor.

However, Utah was moored on the west side of Ford Island and actually took the place of Enterprise after she got underway. But Soucy doesn’t believe that the Japanese were actually mistaken into believing that they had sunk an aircraft carrier.

Japanese Premier, Hideki Tojo announced shortly after the attack that Enterprise was one of the ships sunk that morning. Soucy believes at that point, an

“While we honor those who here gave their last full measure of devotion all of us hope and pray that the time will come when we no longer need to dedicate memorials to men who died in battle - that we will dedicate memorials to those who live in peace - to all nations and all men”

Frank G. Moss
United States Senator
Dec. 7, 1971, Utah Memorial ground breaking

historical error was made and historians continue to feed into the belief that the Japanese were under the impression that they had actually sunk the Enterprise.

Soucy cited that, “Even untrained eyes can tell the difference between a rectangular aircraft carrier and a errata-lined battleship.” Soucy also acknowledged that there are many more myths that continue to circulate about the status of Utah. The first of which is that Utah was a helpless floating target for the Japanese because the ship’s guns had been removed and decks covered with wood to soften the impact of the non-explosive bombs. Not so according to Soucy.

While it’s true that the barrels of Utah’s 12-inch guns had been removed, the ship was far from helpless. The turrets to the guns were still on the ship as were temporary five-inch gun (among many others) training mounts on top of the old turrets - Utah had also been used for the advanced anti-aircraft gunnery school.

From above, in a two-dimensional perspective, it is believed that with the gun barrels gone and the decks covered in wood, the Japanese may have mistaken Utah for Enterprise. But Soucy finds that hard to believe.

“Anyone with the depth perception required to fly an airplane wouldn’t have mistaken the cluttered ship as a carrier from any angle or distance,” he said. As for the wood, six-inch by 12-inch timbers covered the deck, but they in no way covered the massive bridge that was common to the battleships.

Also bothersome to Soucy is the rumor that Utah was one of the last ships attacked. Soucy has photos that show the Utah capsizing. In photos taken by Japanese pilots, there is no evidence of fire or smoke that would be associated with attacks on other ships. According to Soucy, “[Utah] was one of the first ships attacked in actuality.”

Soucy claimed he was in sickbay shortly before 8 a.m. witnessing the attack on Ford Island. A minute or so later, long before the rest of the ships reported that they were being attacked, Utah began to pitch due to a torpedo taken on its port side. Then Soucy realized the unimaginable was taking place that Pearl Harbor was indeed under attack from an enemy.

Like the USS Arizona Memorial that lies on the other side of Ford Island, Soucy wants to help establish the Utah Memorial as a national park. Soucy’s vigilance to keep alive the memory of his 58 shipmates entombed in Utah has been “a tough course to steer.” Because of the Utah’s location on an active naval base, it’s a difficult attraction for many visitors to get to. Access to the base is restricted to DoD card-holders and up until the construction of the Adm. Clarey Bridge in 1998, the island wasn’t even accessible, except by ferry.

During his visit on Tuesday, Soucy was presented with a pleasant surprise that restored his faith to the remembrance of his shipmates. Over 100 10th graders from the Hawaii Baptist Academy on Oahu held a memorial service at the Utah. The students played Taps, sang the National Anthem and read short stories remembering family members who had served during World War II.

The students then dropped flowers into the water in remembrance and thanks to Soucy, his shipmates, their family members and all of the individuals that served during World War II.

The coincidence of the event touched Soucy as he took time to talk to the students about the importance of the memorial and about remembering the 58 shipmates who perished with Utah almost 60 years ago.



(Above) USS Utah survivor, Lee Soucy speaks to a group of 10th graders from Hawaii Baptist Academy during a memorial service the students held in memory of family members that served or died during World War II.



(Right) USS Utah survivor, Lee Soucy salutes during a playing of Taps by a bugler from Hawaii Baptist Academy. More than 100 10th graders from Hawaii Baptist Academy on Oahu held a memorial service at the Utah. The students also sang the National Anthem and read short stories, then dropped flowers into the water in remembrance and thanks to Soucy, his shipmates, their family members and all of the individuals that served during World War II.



Utah survivor, Lee Soucy reads the engraving on the plaque at the USS Utah Memorial. Soucy came to Hawaii to revisit the ship that he served on during the Dec. 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor.



Ashley Sutherland (left) and Stephanie Malin, both 10th graders from Hawaii Baptist Academy sing “Amazing Grace” during a memorial service held by the children on the Utah Memorial on Tuesday. The field trip was in conjunction with their studies on World War II and to remember their family members that had served during the war. Also present was Utah survivor Lee Soucy who gave the kids a first hand account of events of that day.